Buddhism for the Non-Buddhist Layman

By

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The most well-known image of the Buddha depict him sitting very serenely in a state of contemplation, his feet crossed in front of him in a position known as the Lotus position. It is this image of a calm and contemplative human being that has drawn many people to the Buddha and his teachings. We all want to achieve this kind of peace.

The Buddha didn't achieve Nirvana just for himself. Tradition says that the Buddha was tempted to stay under the tree on his awakening and enjoy the experience of Nirvana for himself. However, he got up and taught about the truths he discovered.

What did he talk about? Did he talk about the divine? Did he just declared some truths and claimed absolute authority? No. He talked about problems we all experience as human beings and gave some common sense solutions for them.

In this book, we are going to talk about the truths he "discovered", we will see how Buddhist apply this knowledge in real life and how we can make use of this ancient teaching in our own environment.

To read this book, understand its concepts and apply them you don't need any kind of commitment. You don't need to become part of any church or religion. All that I present here is practical wisdom taught by a great teacher who lived two thousand and a half years ago.

Our Teacher: The Buddha

Historically, we have just a handful of facts we can hold on to tell ourselves about the life story of the Buddha. We know that he was born in the family of king Suddhodana and queen Maya about the year 563 BCE, in a region of the Indian subcontinent that now lies in Southern Nepal.

He was a member of the Shakya tribe, his clan name was Gautama and his given name was Siddhartha, which means something like "mission accomplished". It is common in the Buddhist world to refer to him as Shakyamuni, "the sage of Shakya tribe", to distinguish him from other Buddhas that are venerated in other traditions.

These facts don't tell us very much about what the Buddha did or about what he has meant to his followers. To learn about the Buddha we'll have to turn to stories that Buddhists tell about the Buddha and learn to look at the Buddha through Buddhist eyes.

To tell the story of the Buddha the way that Buddhists tell it, we have to begin not with his birth, but with his previous births. The Buddhist tradition emerged at a time when the doctrine of reincarnation was a basic assumption of Indian religious life. To read more about the beliefs that were present in the Buddha's environment at the time of his birth, read my series of articles The Buddha's Religious Background.

The Jataka Tales

The stories of the Buddha's previous lives are told in a body of texts known as the Jataka or Births Tales. Many of these tales are quite simple and almost childlike. They all teach us a simple moral lesson. Here I will write one to exemplify the style, you should imagine that it is told by a seven-years-old:

Once upon a time there were three animals: a monkey, an elephant and a partridge. They began to discuss which one of them was the oldest of the bunch. The oldest was the one who will deserve special respect.

The elephant pointed to a giant fig tree. Fig trees are in India the biggest trees and the most impressive. He pointed to this gigantic fig tree and said that when he was young, he could walk over the top of it and its leaves would barely touch his belly.

The monkey said that when he was young he could stretch out his neck and eat from the top of the tree.

The partridge said that when he was young he ate a seed and passed through its body, and then grew up to become the tree.

The elephant and the monkey then bent down and paid him homage. The Jataka tale ends like all the others, with a common formula, the Buddha says: ***"And I, the Buddha, was that partridge".***

Technically, the being that appeared as the partridge was not actually the Buddha. In a technical sense, he didn't become the Buddha until he was born as Siddharta Gautama. Buddhist refer to the partridge instead as a bodhisattva. This means something like a "Buddha-to-be", someone who is moving on the way to Buddhahood. Here you can read more about what a bodhisattva is what he does, Mahayana and the Bodhisattva Ideal.

When his career as a bodhisattva came almost to its end, the bodhisattva was born as the son of Suddhodana and Maya. Here begins the story of Siddharta Gautama.

An Unusual Birth

According to Buddhist tradition, the future Buddha sprang right out of his mother's side, took seven steps to the North and announced in a commanding voice: "I am the best of the world. This is my last birth. I will never be born again."

Suddhodana called all the palace's sages and asked them to explain the meaning of what has just happened.

They saw that there were wheels inscribed on the palms of Siddharta's hands and on his feet. They told the father that the child was destined to become a chakravartin, a "wheel turner", someone who turns a wheel.

The wheels could mean either that he would turn the wheel of conquest around India and become a great king, or he could turn the wheel of religious teaching and become a great sage. The eight-spoked wheel is still used as a symbol of Buddhism.

Siddharta's father tried to protect him from the suffering of the world in the hope that he would not choose what to him was the rather troubling option of becoming a religious ascetic.

For a while, the young men's father was successful. Siddharta was married, he had a child and seemed for a while to be quite content with his life in the palace. But one day he was out riding in a park and he saw four sights. These are crucial sights in the history of Buddhist tradition.

Prince Siddharta

He saw someone who was sick, someone who was old, a corpse, and a wandering ascetic. According to the story, this young guy was shocked by what he saw, he really had been protected from anything like this before.

He was shocked by the vision of suffering that it conveyed to him and he decided to leave the palace to become an ascetic. This was the defining moment in the early career of this young man.

As a monk, Siddharta did not find much success. He joined a group of other ascetics and tried to confront the problems of old age and death by starving himself until he was nothing but skin and bones. This wasn't a particularly pleasant time for him, and it didn't bring the results that he wanted.

You can read more about his early life here, Siddharta Gautama's Early Life.

The Middle Path

One day, Siddharta accepted a ball of rice pudding from a young woman who found him exhausted on the side of a river. He then withdrew from the harsh style of asceticism to a practice that Buddhists traditionally refer to as the Middle Path, a very important concept.

The concept of the Middle Path covers all sort of aspects of the way Buddhists live. The point is to avoid two extremes. One is an extreme of self-denial. To deny yourself too much. Not to care appropriately for the needs of the body and the personality.

The other extreme is the one of self-indulgence. A form on indulgence that affects not only the way that people live but also the way people think. Specially the way they think about themselves. Read more about The Middle Path.

The Great Enlightenment

When Siddharta found the Middle Path, things began to move more quickly for him. He sat down under a tree and he fixed himself in meditation. He was tempted by Mara, who is the personification of death in the Buddhist tradition. He first sent his daughters to seduce Siddharta. Then he sent the armies of his son to distract him.

I think of these armies not so much the way it often has been presented traditionally in Buddhist literature, as the armies of Mara fighting the Buddha trying to scare him away from this serious conviction and commitment. But instead I think of them as the last vestige of his life as a prince.

This young man, thirty-five or thirty-six years old, had tried to turn his back on the princely life that he once has lived and now was attempting to seek this solution to the problem of transmigration, and out of his past came the old gang. All of those guys that used to fight with him and said to Siddharta: "Come and fight with us! Just as we used to do. Be a prince like you once were."

The story in Buddhist literature of course says that he resisted the temptation that these armies presented and he reached down in his meditation and touched the earth. The earth shook to bear witness to the strength of his conviction.

And once this happened, once Mara had been defeated, Siddharta was on his way to enlightenment. In the dark of the night, he passed through stages of meditation and finally understood what causes the suffering of the world and how he could bring it to a definitive end. Read more about his first Nirvana.

The Buddha's Insight: A Life of Suffering

The Buddha declared that all he taught was suffering, its origin and cessation. The traditional summary of his teaching is given in four categories, the so called Four Noble Truths. And yes, they are all about suffering. The Four Noble Truths are:

- The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha)
- The Arising of Suffering (Samudaya)
- The Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha)
- The Truth of the Way (Mārga) that leads to the cessation of suffering.

Some people say that if you understand the Truth of Suffering you understand all of the Four Noble Truths by implication. The truth of suffering is expressed in the simple claim that All is Suffering. This phrase posses a problem for us. It's not easy to interpret.

If you know Buddhist people you know that they are not sad and depressive. In fact, they are quick to laugh. They have some kind of lightness and buoyancy. The Dalai Lama, for example, looks like he floats through the world. His well-known smile conveys something important about the Buddhist tradition: it's lighness and buoyancy.

So, how do you get from this claim, the claim that all is suffering, to the buoyancy and lightness of Buddhist experience?

The Types of Suffering

Buddhist teaching interprets the phrase "all is suffering" in three separate ways. Everything is suffering in one or more of three ways.

The first of these types of suffering is called Dukkha-dukkha. Suffering-suffering. The obvious suffering in situations where things cause you physical or mental pain.

The second kind of suffering is called Viparinama-dukkha. Suffering due to transformation or change. This means that even the most pleasurable things can cause you suffering when they begin to change and pass away.

The third kind of suffering is Sankhara-dukkha. Suffering due to conditioned states. This category of dukkha is associated with pleasurable things that can cause pain even in the midst of the pleasure, if that pleasure is based in an illusion about the nature of the object, or even about the nature of the self.

When I'm speaking about these three kinds of suffering, I try to illustrate them by telling a parable that may sound contemporary but that also is related to Buddhist examples that are used to explain the nature of suffering.

This is a parable about an automobile. I try to imagine scenarios in which the car might cause some kind of suffering. First of all, you got a guy in the automobile driving down the street, he sees his girlfriend on the sidewalk, he waves to her and runs into the back of a bus.

There is a huge crash and what he feels is Dukkha-dukkha. The palpable physical suffering of an automobile accident. That's easy to understand.

The second kind of suffering comes if you are attached to that car. Many people relate to this, they have automobiles that they love. They don't have a very good time during the winter. The winter is cruel. There is a lot of ice. People vandalize automobiles. Rust creeps into parts of the vehicle, the front end becomes unbalanced.

As you see, the car begins to disintegrate. It causes you suffering in relation to the pleasure, to the attachment that you have invested in that object, as it begins to slip away from you.

That also is pretty clear. Viparinama-dukkha, the suffering that comes from change is a pretty easy concept to grasp.

The third concept is a bit more difficult. I'm not so sure much of the time that I'm really able to convey it with this example. The way I do it is to imagine the person in the car, fully invested, with all of his ego in this powerful object. Roaring up and down the avenue, feeling the pleasure and energy from being in this powerful embodiment of his manhood.

Ask yourself wether at that moment he is really happy. If you ask him if he is happy, of course he is going to say yes. The pleasure of that experience is extremely satisfying. That can't be denied, but is it real happiness?

I think we know enough about situations like that in our world to begin to question wether that's the place where satisfaction really comes from. According to Buddhist teachings, that satisfaction is based on a certain kind of illusion about the nature of the object, and an illusion about the nature of the self.

Sometimes in some situations, perhaps in many situations, we are suffering in ways that we are not aware of, because of illusions that we have about the nature of our self or about the nature of the objects that populate our world.

The Arising of Suffering

The second Noble Truth is the truth of the origin of suffering. The origin of suffering is explained in traditional Buddhist doctrine by a causal sequence that is known as the Twelve-Fold Chain of Dependent Arising.

Suffering come into existence by depending on a bunch of causes. That's what it basically means. We can go through all the twelve links in the chain, but I always found the chain a little bit confusing. It seems historically that it really is a combination of two attempts to explain the origin of suffering that have been cemented together.

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It is more valuable to just single out the key links that seem to express the view of the world that is encapsulated in this vision. The first link that is important is the link that leads from ignorance to desire. The idea here is that if you have a misconception about the nature of things, out of that misconception could come some sort of desire. Ignorance is really the start of the chain.

Out of desire comes birth. You have a process where ignorance leads to some kind of desire for an object, out of that desire we try to bring that object into being. Ignorance is the initial cause that fuels the chain.

To understand what Buddhists have in mind when they make these series of connections one way to do it would be to imagine some kind of glossy advertisement. Imagine an advertisement that creates an image for ourselves. This is something fantastic and desirable. Ask what kinds of illusions it fosters, what kind of desires is meant to arise and what comes into being as a result of all of those desires.

Most of those illusions are pretty benign, but they feed a process that eventually lead to the cycle of death and rebirth.

The Marks of Existence

The next question is, what are we ignorant about? The most basic form of ignorance is the ignorance about the self. We have to study the concept of self that the Buddha developed. Along the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha taught about the marks of existence. All phenomena are marked by three characteristics:

- Anicca (impermanence): all things are in a constant state of flux.
- Dukkha (pain or suffering): All causes suffering. Nothing found in the physical world or even the psychological realm can bring lasting deep satisfaction.
- Anatta (not-self): nothing has a permanent self or identity.

The key concept for us here to take a step deeper into the Buddhist vision of the world is this concept of not-self. What does it mean for Buddhists to say that things have no self?

Buddhists are claim that things have no permanent identity that lies from one moment to the next. What we mean here is not that there is nothing going on. We're here. Things are real in a sense, but they are transient and pass away.

We too are transient phenomena. Our personality is constantly changing, is evolving all the time. In big ways, in subtle ways, it is constantly moving. What we call our self is a kind of illusory construction that causes us pain.

If you think about this idea, it poses a bunch of problems for us. A bunch of problems that we would have to discuss and we would have to ponder together.

What am I?

The answer that Buddhists give typically is that the personality is made up of five aggregates or khandhas. Bundles of momentary phenomena. They are: matter, sensations, ideas, volitional states or decisions we make about things, and finally consciousness.

These aggregates are only momentary. Think of them as flickers on a video screen. They are only momentary, but they group together to create the illusion of some kind of continuity or permanence.

Buddhists traditionally use two comparisons to express this idea. One is to say that the personality is like the stream of a river. Like the flow of the stream. The word stream is often used to name the personality. The personality is nothing but a stream of aggregates flowing through the world.

Another comparison that they use is to think about the personality as a flame. A flame of fire. This is actually useful because it also suggests at the same time that the personality is burning in a painful way. It is a fire that we fuel by all the actions that we perform to achieve a certain goal or to avoid a certain state. All what we do is like throwing logs on a great fire. And it burns constantly, changing from one moment to the next.

There is another important question about this doctrine of not-self. According to the Indian view of the world, when someone dies, the soul continues on and it is reborn in another body like the caterpillar that moves from one blade of grass to the next. If there is no self, then what is reborn? What is that is reborn if there is no self?

The traditional answer is also the comparison with the flame. When death occurs, the previous physical body disintegrates, and the last moment of consciousness, like the last flicker in a candle flame, sets another candle flame in motion. It kindles another candle flame in another body and carries with it that causal continuity that establishes some connection between one life and the next.

Another obvious question that is closely related to the previous one is in what sense we can say that we are the same person that we were ten minutes or ten years ago, or even in a past life. Buddhists would like to assert some kind of identity from one moment to the next, but it shouldn't be an identity that ties them down too much. It shouldn't assert any kind of permanence, as this permanence dissolves as the personality changes. Consciousness is the closest to the permanent idea of "Self", but is ever-changing with each new thought according to this viewpoint.

Buddhists texts assert that you can say that you are the same person as before in in a kind of metaphorical way. For example, you light a candle flame, five minutes from now you would still think that it is the same flame. When we say that it is the same flame what we really mean is that there is a causal connection that links the flames. They are not identical, the gases themselves burn, something has changed. Sameness is a concept that I apply to that flame in order to designate the causal connection that links one moment in the flame to another.

So, I can speak about myself as being the same person but it is something like a metaphor, a conventional designation.

However, ultimately speaking, it is not the same flame. I am not the same person. I have no identity that endures from one moment to the next. The ultimate Buddhist claim about the nature of the self is that it is transient and constantly changeable. This is the fundamental Buddhist insight about the nature of the world. There is no permanent identity that moves from one moment to the next.

I consider this doctrine the most fundamental of all Buddhist teachings, one in which all the others are based. It is also a teaching that we can experience ourselves. We know this is true, things change, all the time. We say that they are the same thing as before out of conventionality.

Not-Self is about Freedom

Many may ask if Buddhists are pessimistic when they say that nothing has a self. There are a lot of things in this world that we hold on to and we really like. When that it is striped away, it begins to feel like a negative experience.

But it doesn't take much thought to realize that is not so much pessimistic as it is realistic. The truth is that we change. Life passes. The experiences of six months ago or ten years ago are gone. If we try to hold on to them they are going to cause us some kind of suffering.

This realization that things are impermanent, and the ability to let go of stuff that has changed and become part of our past is what makes the doctrine of suffering buoyant, light and easy. This can be expressed in that exquisite smile that the Dalai Lama brings to so many of his teachings.

To recognize that there is no self, in the end, is not to loose anything important. It is simply to let go of the frustration and the attachment that brings suffering to this world. This extraordinary claim, All is Suffering, becomes a claim about freedom, about buoyancy, about lightness, and in the end, about Nirvana.

To illustrate this I want to tell you a little anecdote. There was a question I always wanted to make to a serious practitioner of Buddhism. What do you really believe about the doctrine of transmigration? Once I knew a Tibetan monk, he was a recognized reincarnation of a great monk from a previous generation. I took him aside one day and said: "Well, there is nobody else listening, nobody will overhear our conversation, tell me what it was like to be a monk in Eastern Tibet in your previous incarnation."

He just left. He smiled at me and said: "I can't even remember what I have for breakfast, let alone what I did in my previous life". I took from that not just a sneaky way of avoiding the question, but also a rather subtle and effective reminder of something important about Buddhism. **There is nothing more mysterious about the passing from one life to another than there is in our passing from one moment to another.**

We constantly change and the person who is here today is different from the person who was here yesterday. To grasp the reality of ourselves we have to come to terms with that changeable aspect of our experience. Even in this moment, everything that we experience is flowing through us, constantly changing. So, the person who started minutes ago to read this book now has become something completely different.

The concept of no-self helps us understand why Buddhists do not consider the doctrine of suffering particularly pessimistic. From a Buddhist point of view, it's simply realistic. It's simply a fact of the nature of reality. We have to accept that the human personality and everything around it is constantly changing.

The cause of suffering is not the change itself, but the human desire to hold on to things and prevent them from changing. Buddhists that look at the world through the lenses of not-self, do not approach it in a pessimistic way. They understand that if everything changes, it's possible for everything to become new. It's possible to approach even the most difficult situations in life with a sense of lightness, buoyancy and freedom.

When we live or encounter with Buddhist cultures we encounter people who are not oppressed by a depressive or sad vision of the world, but we find a sense of lightness. People are quick to laugh, and quick to let go of things that are painful. Why? Because everything changes, everything is impermanent. In the end, there is nothing to hold on to. That is their secret.

The Path To Achieve Liberation

Buddhism is a practical philosophy, it is about experiencing the nature of things. Here we are going to talk about what we should do to stop suffering.

With all that we said we've got implicitly a roadmap of how we can solve the problem of suffering. Previously we said that suffering arises from ignorance, and then we talked about what kind of ignorance we have: ignorance about the self. If you want to stop suffering, what you do then is to remove ignorance. Somehow chip away at that basic misconception that people have about the world, and as a result diminish desire.

Slowly some of those desires begin to slip away, and as a result of that, the process of birth will begin to unravel. It may not happen quickly, it may not even happen in this lifetime. In fact, according to this tradition, it's very likely that it won't happen in this lifetime, but at least you can set the process moving in a more positive direction.

What is Nirvana

This concept is talked about a lot and it is a part of our vocabulary. You can speak of all sorts of things as being as Nirvana and generally they are quite positive and pleasurable. That is the popular idea about Nirvana. The truth is that it is not positive in a quite obvious way. Actually, if you think about the meaning of the word, the etymology of the word it's quite a negative concept. Nirvana means literally to blow out. To extinguish the flame of a candle.

You might say that Nirvana is the cessation, is the extinction of the fire that burns constantly from one life to the next. It is important to realize that Nirvana is a hard image and in many respects quite a cold image.

The comparison that I use when I talk about this comes from a experience I had quite a while ago. Once when I was on vacation, I went to a great Roman church, the Thursday night before Easter, when the lights inside the church were extinguished.

I have to say that that experience was very moving for me. We were in this great dark church, it was nighttime, it was early in the spring. There was a line of Italian choir boys walking out of the service when it was over, each one of them carrying a big candle. As they walked out, each one blew out the candle. One after another. And when the last candle went out, the church was plunged into darkness.

Then everyone left the church, in silence. It was quiet, it was dark, it was deeply moving. That's not unlike Nirvana. Nirvana is the extinction of the flame of desire, the flame of existence.

For us to understand this technical concept, to dig more deeply into what's going on here, we have to understand that Nirvana comes at two moments in the Buddha's life. It comes first in the moment of his awakening. That's the first moment of extinguishing, the first time when he realizes that the fire will eventually go out.

At the moment of his awakening, he understands thoroughly what the causes are of the process of death and rebirth that he knows he is not fueling anymore. That's Nirvana number one. It is called Nirvana with residues, because there is still karma from past lives that needs to be worked out.

Eventually, forty years or so later, he has the experience of Parinirvana at the end of his life. The complete extinction, when all of it burns out. The Buddha is released completely from the cycle of death and rebirth.

These two moments are called Nirvana with residues and Nirvana without residues. Nirvana without residues is also called Parinirvana.

With the concept of Nirvana we now face a dilemma that is similar to the dilemma we faced earlier with the concept of suffering. Nirvana is spoken of in the Buddhist tradition as being extremely desirable, something we would really like to seek, and yet we have to confront it initially as being a rather harsh concept, a concept that has to do with the extinction of things that for many of us are pretty desirable in the normal understanding of human life.

Why would you ever want to seek Nirvana if it involves the extinction of all these things that are desirable?

The Problem of Samsara

The first answer to this question has to be one in which we look very carefully at the Indian assumption about the nature of reincarnation. In India, the cycle of deaths and rebirth is called **Samsara**. This word means simply to wander from one life to the next. Its meaning suggest to you what emotion is associated with this idea in India.

Here we are not talking about marching from one life to another in order to achieve a particular goal. We are talking about the experience of wandering, as you go from one life to the next not knowing fully how it is that you got where you are, or where it is you are really going to end up.

Many of us, coming from a western religious environment and a western cultural environment, are likely to think of reincarnation in a certain way. Perhaps as a possibility that would allow us to come back into this world, and experience again something that we really missed in this life. Something positive, something really to be sought. It tended not to work out that way in India.

For a long time, I used to think of myself as a frustrated baseball player, as a short boy who didn't have the needed physical skills or the body to go out and be a great success on the baseball field. I thought, maybe if I came back in another life then I could be the great baseball player that I wanted to be. Why not? Why wouldn't we try to manipulate our lives in this world, so that we can come back in a form that will be more attractive or more pleasurable to us?

In India, reincarnation didn't come to be viewed as being an opportunity, but to be viewed, instead, as a burden. Indian civilization, in the centuries that it began to lead up to the life of the Buddha, came to view reincarnation not as a single life or two or three lives strung together, but saw it on a time scale that involved millions and millions of lifetimes.

Whatever those challenges were that you wanted to meet in some new life began to seem very small in the large scale of cosmic history that you are involved in.

One of the best ways to get a sense of the emotional impact of this idea is to consider one of my favorite stories. It is the story about the god Indra and the Brahmin boy.

Indra has just won a great victory, he actually slayed a demon that held the waters of creation in its belly, and he has released the waters of creation over the world. It set the whole process of creation in motion. And in order to celebrate this, he decides to build a palace.

He gets the divine architect Viswakarma to design the most perfect throne room, guest houses, kitchens and all that sort of thing. And he builds and builds. So, the Viswakarma architect eventually becomes tired of all this. He goes to the god Brahma and asks him for help, just to cool down some of the enthusiasm that was driving Indra to make this massive building.

Brahma manifest himself as a Brahmin boy, as a child. And he goes to visit Indra in his palace. Indra is required by the custom in that culture to provide lavish entertainment and a beautiful welcome for the child. He brings food, music, entertainment and all that sort of stuff, presents it to the child and the boy begins to weep.

He is down at the floor and breaks out into tears. Indra is stunned by this, so he looks at the boy and he asks: "What's wrong?". And the boy points at a line of ants running across the floor, and he says Indra: "Each one of those ants was an Indra just like you in a previous life, and not only one time, but millions and millions of times, and that will happen to you. You too some day will fall down from your position as the king of the gods and you'll be an ant crawling across the floor of someone else's throne room."

And Indra, of course stunned by this new vision of himself in this vast scale of time, in which even the most extraordinary achievements eventually decayed and slipped away.

Reincarnation, visualized on this massive time scale, becomes a problem to be solved, rather than an opportunity to be exploited.

Now, back to the Buddha. If Samsara is something you want to escape, the Buddha showed the way. Nirvana is negative in an appropìate way in the Indian tradition, because Samsara is something that you would like to avoid and you would like to escape. However, this is not the full picture.

Nirvana as Freedom

Nirvana wasn't just the moment of death for the Buddha, his Parinirvana. It was also that moment of his awakening that took place when he was a young man. He realizes at that moment that he was free from all the ignorance that drove the cycle of transmigration, and then he lived for forty years. A long, productive life.

If you want to understand what is positive about Nirvana, the most important thing to do is to try to imagine what he was like. Try to know what that Buddha was like as he glided through the landscape of Northern India for forty years after his awakening.

I think that he was exquisitely free. He was free from desire, he was free from ignorance and there was nothing that troubled him or disturbed his heart. As the result of that, he was able to respond freely to the interests and needs of the people around him.

There are many stories that tell us what the Buddha was like. I particularly like the story of Angulimala. A monk whose name means "garland of fingers".

Agulimala was an applied student eager to please a demanding teacher. Agulimala was a wonderful student and he arouse the jealousness of his classmates. They go to the teacher and begin to tell him stories that are not entirely attractive, "poisoning his mind".

The teacher decides to get revenge on Angulimala by calling him and saying: "Listen, there is one more payment I expect from you before I give you my final teaching". Angulimala of course agrees to do anything. "I want you to bring me the fingers of a thousand people you have killed , and then I will give you my final teaching."

Agulimala begins to kill people and collect their fingers. At first, he just hide them in the forest but eventually he begins to loose them, so he collects them together in a garland around his neck.

The villagers tell about this to the king and he sends a squad out to do something about Agulimala, to put him out of business. Angulimala's mother knows about this and she of course is protective about her son. She goes out and warns him that the king enforcers where coming to arrest him.

The Buddha also hears about it. He realizes that by this time Angulimala is so far gone that he would kill his own mother to get her fingers. So the Buddha goes into the forest to somehow lead him away from this life that he had fallen into.

The Buddha walks slowly on a path through the forest. Angulimala is out there and sees him coming. He starts running to catch him and steal his fingers, but as he chases the Buddha through the forest, somehow the Buddha manages to glide just a step ahead of Angulimala.

Agulimala says: "Stop! Stop!". Then the Buddha turns around and says to him: "I have stopped, Angulimala. Why don't you stop?". Agulimala says: "You haven't stopped, every time I try to catch you, you slip away into the underbrush".

"I have stopped all of the causes of death and rebirth. Why don't you stop?". And at this point Angulimala reverts back to the old student that he once was. He falls down at the feet of the Buddha, and tears, and asks to be taught about the meaning of death and rebirth. How himself can begin to unravel that cycle of suffering that he has inadvertently cast himself into. He goes on to become one of the remarkable early followers of the Buddha.

This story shows how the Buddha was able to tune in to the particular religious needs of his followers and crystallize some kind of religious transformation that was deeply personal for them.

You also could say that he is wise. He understands what the world brings. There is nothing that is going to shake him in that sense. We can speak about the Buddha as being wise, as being unattached, as being free and able to act with spontaneity and clarity of mind.

It is important for us to understand Nirvana as a negative idea. In understanding it as a negative idea, we understand it in its Indian way, as a concept that responds to the particular challenges and needs of Indian civilization. But it is not a negative concept in its totality. It is negative in form, but positive in content.

The experience that you have of Nirvana is an experience of freedom, of detachment, of wisdom, and the ability to respond with clarity of mind to all the difficulties that life presents you. In that sense, you can imagine that it is the Buddhist image of perfection of a human person, because that is what the Buddha is.

The Path

What should we do to achieve the cessation of suffering? What is the path Buddhists follow to achieve self-awakening? The Path of Nirvana is often divided in eight categories, like the eight spokes of the wheel of the Buddha's teaching. It is called The Noble Eightfold Path.

The concepts that it includes are: right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. The word "right", here denotes completion, togetherness, and coherence, and which can also carry the sense of "perfect" or "ideal". The Path is often represented by means of the dharma wheel, whose eight spokes represent the eight elements.

Let's go through each concept:

Right Understanding

The words that are used here could also be translated as "right visions" or "right perspective". It is the right way of looking at life, nature and the world as they really are. It is to understand how reality works. Right understanding begins with concepts and propositional knowledge but through the practice of right concentration it gradually becomes transmuted into wisdom. The Buddha said:

"And what is right view? Knowledge with reference to suffering, knowledge with reference to the origination of suffering, knowledge with reference to the cessation of suffering, knowledge with reference to the way of practice leading to the cessation of suffering: This is called right understanding."

This concept involves understanding the following reality:

- **The Law of Karma**: Every action will have a result.
- **The Marks of Existence**: That everything is impermanent and nothing has a permanent self.
- **Suffering**: The arising of craving is the root cause of the arising of suffering and the cessation of craving is the root cause of the cessation of the suffering. The way leading to the cessation of suffering is the noble eightfold path. This means basically that you should understand the Four Noble Truths.

Right Intention

This could also be translated as "right thought", "right resolve"or "the exertion of our own will to change". The practitioner should constantly aspire to rid themselves of whatever qualities that they know are wrong and immoral.The Buddha said:

"And what is right intention? Being resolved on renunciation, on freedom from ill will, on harmlessness: This is called right intention."

Right Speech

This concept deals with the way in which a Buddhist practitioner would best make use of his words. The Buddha said:

"And what is right speech? Abstaining from lying, from divisive speech, from abusive speech, and from idle chatter: This is called right speech."

Right Action

This means not to act in ways that would bring harm to oneself or to others. The Buddha said:

"And what is right action? Abstaining from taking life, from stealing, and from sexual misconduct. This is called right action."

Right Livelihood

This means that practitioners ought not to engage in trades or occupations which, either directly or indirectly, result in harm for other living beings.

The five types of businesses that are harmful to undertake are:

- **Business in weapons**: trading in all kinds of weapons and instruments for killing.
- **Business in human beings**: slave trading, prostitution, or the buying and selling of children or adults.
- **Business in meat**: "meat" refers to the bodies of beings after they are killed. This includes breeding animals for slaughter.
- **Business in intoxicants**: manufacturing or selling intoxicating drinks or addictive drugs.
- **Business in poison**: producing or trading in any kind of toxic product designed to kill.

Right Effort

The practitioners should make a persisting effort to abandon all the wrong and harmful thoughts, words, and deeds.

Right Mindfulness

Practitioners should constantly keep their minds alert to phenomena that affect the body and mind. They should be mindful and deliberate, making sure not to act or speak due to inattention or forgetfulness.

Right Concentration

This is the practice of concentration or meditation. The practitioner concentrates on an object of attention until reaching full concentration and a state of meditative absorption.

The Three Categories

The logic of the Path becomes a little bit more clear if we take these eight categories and reduce them or group them together into three. This is often done in traditional Buddhist teaching. The three categories are:

- Sila, or moral conduct.
- Samadhi, mental concentration.
- And Panna, or wisdom.

Wisdom (Panna)	1. Right Understanding
	2. Right Intention
Moral Conduct (Sila)	3. Right Speech
	4. Right Action
	5. Right Livelihood
Mental Concentration (Samadhi)	6. Right Effort
	7. Right Mindfulness
	8. Right Concentration

Moral Conduct

First of all, you should abide basic rules of moral conduct. Why? Because if you perform actions that are going to be dangerous and destructive for other people or for yourself, you may end coming back like a worm or a mosquito in a future life according to the law of karma. It is not that easy, if you are a mosquito, to try to achieve Nirvana. It would be a good idea to start by engaging in the proper modes of conduct that would make it possible for you to come back in a way that would be conducive to Nirvana.

Moral conduct is necessary to restrain from unwholesome deeds of body and speech to prevent the faculties of bodily action and speech from becoming tools of the defilement. It is used primarily as aids for mental purification. What are the basic rules?

- Do not kill
- Do not steal
- Do not lie
- Do not engage in sexual misconduct
- Do not drink intoxicants

This precepts apply to lay people as well as to monks. Monks observe other precepts and a number of other regulations that have to do specifically with the monastic life.

Mental Concentration

Buddhist practitioners engage in mental concentration or meditation. The term here is Samadhi, to concentrate the mind. Maybe you think that meditation is the most fundamental thing that Buddhists do, and that's certainly true in many parts of the Buddhist tradition. It is possible to meditate in any situation of our lives.

What you try to do is to situate yourself very stably, sit in a chair. You can even do it standing if you can be stable. Keep your back straight. The Dalai Lama insists on this when he teaches meditation. It is important to do it because it allows you to breath freely, allows you diaphragm to be free. And then you might want to fold your hands in front of you. And then just breath. Concentrate your attention as much as you can on that place where your breathing centers, and allow your body and your mind to become calm.

With this, you allow the thoughts in your head to simply drain out of your mind. This is like doing for the mind what the discipline of moral conduct does for the body. It is a way to stop all of those distractions and all of that negative tendencies that tie you to the experience of death and rebirth.

Wisdom

Wisdom is what eventually will lead you to Nirvana. Right understanding is the forerunner of the entire Noble Eightfold Path. When you achieve right understanding, that will inspire and encourage the arising of right intention. Right intention will lead to right speech and right action. Right action will lead to the arising of right livelihood. Right livelihood will lead to the arising of right effort. Right effort will lead to right mindfulness.

Right mindfulness is used to maintain right understanding and avoid desire and delusion. Once these support conditions have been established, a practitioner can then practice right concentration more easily. In the state of concentration, one will need to investigate and verify his or her understanding of right view. This will then result in the arising of right knowledge, which will eliminate greed, hatred and delusion.

Right knowledge is seeing things as they really are by direct experience, not as they appear to be, nor as the practitioner wants them to be, but as they truly are. The result of Right Knowledge is liberation.

A Path of Personal-Development and Wisdom

The great irony of Buddhism is that although it expouses the doctrine of not-self, that noting has a lasting self or identity, including people, it's teachings are about improving our personality. Moral conduct and meditation lead to a better body and mind, but what is more important is wisdom.

The Buddhist path is about seeking wisdom. An old Buddhist proverb says:

"Not to do any evil, to cultivate good, and to purify one's mind. This is the teaching of the Buddha."

To do good and to avoid evil. Every religion teaches you that. That last bit is what makes Buddhism unique: "To purify one's mind." That's the Buddha speaking. You've got to find some way to purify the mind of ignorance and desire. Then you can really strike the root of the issues of evil and good. This is the teaching of the Buddha.

Thank You

I think we now have a glimpse of what Buddhism is all about. Now, if you want to continue with the study of the different traditions you can come back to my site at http://buddhism-eyes.blogspot.com, which is updated regularly.

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